

Noronha, Federick: Pio Gama Pinto, a rare Goan of another era

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In my college days, a friend (who was also a colleague and co-villager, if not mistaken) shared with me a photocopy of a slender booklet. It was titled, “Pio Gama Pinto – Independent Kenya’s First Martyr”. It intrigued me, and promptly went into my collection of Goan books. But not before reading it carefully, and being myself mesmerised by what was written about this man and his life. Who was the person behind this possibly Goan name? How and why did he become a “martyr”? It was only in later years thanks to expat Goan-tracking websites like goanvoice.org.uk that one got to know more. Pio Gama Pinto was indeed very much Goan, and his life was both unusual and intriguing.

Over the past few months, a new (and till date, perhaps the most comprehensive) book on Pio has just been released. It is called *Pio Gama Pinto: Kenya’s Unsung Martyr 1927-1965*. It has so much information about so many aspects of his life, Kenyan politics, his Goan connections and more. This is not surprising, for the book has been authored by the British-Kenyan library science professional, Shiraz Durrani. Known for his writing on the social and political

dimensions of information and librarianship, Durrani tackles the subject with care and detail; it is a well documented work.

There were a few thousand (this is no exaggeration) Goans in East Africa till the 1960s. Canada-based statistician John Nazareth, who himself grew up in Kenya and incidentally was visiting Goa recently, estimates that at its heyday, the Goan population in Kenya was 16,000. This includes 10,000 in Nairobi, 2000 in Mombasa and 4000 in the rest of Kenya (in 1962).

Undoubtedly, 99.99 per cent of these went there for a livelihood, as did so many other Goans who went to diverse parts of the globe or other parts of India too. The remainder 0.01 per cent was made up of the Pio Gama Pintos.

Without wanting to make an unfair comparison, it is a fact that migrants, by definition, travel far and wide primarily (if not purely) out of financial motives. We would focus on the salaries we earn, the perks we receive, the kind of lifestyle we can attain. Sometimes (as in East Africa), life gets so good, that it is easy to overlook all other issues, concerns and realities. My own folks migrated to another distant part of the globe, which I only much later realised had turned into one of the ten most polluted spots on the planet. This too could only be expected, because industries bring in jobs, and attract migration too. Fortunately, a clean-up has been undertaken, and things are not so bad there now. But we and our lifestyles probably added to that pollution.

Pio, b 1927, was assassinated in 1965, just a few years after Kenya got its independence and even before he could complete his thirties. He boldly led anti-colonial and anti-imperialistic battles in Kenya and India. He fought Portuguese colonialism in Goa and backed the Mau Mau in Kenya's war of independence. For the latter, the British rewarded him with half-a-decade in jail. After independence, he was not prepared to sit tight and instead fought neo-colonialism in Kenya.

Pio built networks in East Africa, Asia, Southern Africa and the US. His politics were radical, and he believed that the battle for

independence should not end with building a new class of affluent Africans.

More importantly, Pio tackled the way politicians of independent Kenya were grabbing land, buying loyalty using it, and even bribing the opposition with land 'gifts'. He stood by Kenyatta during the Independence movement, but questioned the Prime Minister's controversial policies after the British left. Pio set up the Pan African Press and had a vision that looked beyond Kenya alone. For this, Pio was shot dead just outside his home; till date a whole lot of discussion takes place over who killed him and why, while the real killers have gotten off with their act.

Cyprian Fernandes, the ex-Kenya journalist now in Australia, writes that the American campaigner Malcolm X found "he had a lot in common with Pinto" when he visited Kenya in 1959. Ironically enough, both were assassinated within three days of each other. Durrani is thorough in his work. His book, incidentally, was first announced in 1987, and work on it started in 1980. It was only in 2018 that it could finally emerge. Just Google for his name, and you'll get the point.

Durrani writes, somewhat modestly (p 17): "This book does not aim or claim to be a comprehensive record on Pio Gama Pinto. It is only a beginning of a long journey necessary to record the history of Kenya from an anti-imperialist perspective...."

But the book is rather detailed. It contains a history of how it came about; an introduction by the prize-winning human rights lawyer Pheroze Nowrojee, and many others including friends, family and political comrades. In doing so, it also gives hints of a forgotten Goan history in Kenya, involving people like Joseph Murumbi, who had an equally intriguing and waiting-to-be-celebrated life and times. In case the name didn't ring a bell, it only shows that we clearly need to know more about those with Goan connections who shaped world history.

Another section presents Pio in his own words, and yet another piece offers the views of his widow Emma. There is also a 50-plus page section of documentation, in which the author's librarianship gets used to the fore.

Pio and his life need to be celebrated, not just because in these (supposedly) post-colonial times he is a model whose role was different from that of so many other Goans. More importantly, he had the intellectual honesty to take the side of the underdog – the Black African then struggling for basic human dignity, and rights in his own land. It is people like Pio who will continue to inspire for swimming against the tide of popular opinion, for standing up for the underdog, and for paying the price. The least we can do back home is to pay homage to his memory by not forgetting it.